

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

John P. Entelis, Comparative Politics of North Africa: Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/23r0c3wv>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 10(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Harmon, Steve

Publication Date

1981

DOI

10.5070/F7103017293

Copyright Information

Copyright 1981 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

BOOK REVIEW

Comparative Politics of North Africa: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. John P. Entelis, Syracuse University Press, 1980. 196 pp. Index. Map. Bibliography. \$8.95 paper.

John P. Entelis' work is a brief introductory survey of post-independence political history and structure in the Maghrib countries. It is intended as an introduction, and is geared to the nonspecialist or the undergraduate. Colonial background is treated in the first chapter, followed by a section on each of the three nations in the post-independence period. Within each section, the breakdown is thematic, covering such topics as political structure, political economy and foreign policy. Comparisons and contrasts are facilitated by examining each topic nation by nation. This topical breakdown is a strong point of the book and adds to its clarity.

As implied in the title, the work is strictly a political text, giving concise analyses of the stages of political development. The chapter on the colonial period identifies different forms of colonialism associated with each country. The French are said to have practised "segmented" colonialism in Morocco, highly visible economic domination, without destroying "the basic political and cultural order." Tunisia is said to represent "instrumental" colonialism, economic control, but with more interference in political and cultural sectors. Algeria is considered to have been a victim of "total" colonialism, domination of society economically, politically and socially. This section contains a clear account of the Code de L'Indigenat as enforced in colonial Algeria (p. 20). While effectively demonstrating differences in the colonial experience in the three countries, these models seem to dodge some of the more conventional scholarship. For example, though discussing Algeria's sizable French community, Entelis does not use the term "settler colonialism" to distinguish the situation from that of Tunisia or Morocco.

The structure and nature of political forms are analyzed in detail. For example, the author notes that one of the sources of the Moroccan monarchy's legitimacy is that the king is a dispenser of baraka (literally, blessing) for the nation. Baraka is a typical source of power for African Muslim religious leaders; the Moroccan king, as leader of an Islamic state, is "commander of the faithful," a dispenser of powerful baraka (p. 65). A good summary is provided of what Entelis calls "contradictions" in Algerian political culture. One such example is reaching for "Westernization" in economic and educational policies, but stressing

"Arabization" in cultural matters. Another is "statism" vs. "populism" which refers to the drive for strong national control of government and economic policy, as pitted against stated Algerian goals of decentralization and mass participation in politics. The controversy over Tunisia's experiments with autogestion, or worker control, is mentioned as a further example of the "statism" vs. "populism" contradiction. Autogestion was attempted in the early 1960s by President Ben Bella as a solution to reopening abandoned French farms (p. 88), but was unpopular with military leaders who saw it as being at odds with centralist ("statist") policies. Entelis' discussion of autogestion in Tunisia is informative, but his top-down view of this essentially populist movement hints at the author's own "statist" orientation.

Although intended as a political study, the work is weakened by not placing enough emphasis on social and economic factors. The importance of the organized labor movement is treated far too briefly throughout. In the Moroccan chapter, no mention is made of C.C. Stewart's well-developed concept of "dualism," which refers to the colonial and domestic sectors of the economy.¹ Little is provided in the way of class analysis, and it is often unclear which class holds power, except for nebulous references to "elites." Some class analysis is finally addressed regarding the involvement of a Tunisian landholding class in the PSD, Destourian Socialist Party (p. 159). Entelis is also slow to treat the extractive economy as a theme in Maghribian history. However, he accurately describes underdevelopment, without using the term, while explaining Tunisia's foreign investment laws (p. 177).

The book's major weakness is its bias, which takes both ethnic and political forms. Ethnically, it clearly is written from a Middle Eastern rather than an Africanist perspective. The author attempts to minimize the differences between Arab and Berber culture, stating that the Berbers are "thoroughly Islamized," despite speaking Berber languages. Furthermore, though the work claims to be about the nations of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, it is really about the northern littoral and mountains, largely overlooking the hinterlands of the Central and Western Sahara. This is a further reflection of the book's non-Africanist point of view. Even the treatment of Arab culture shows European bias, frequently characterizing Arab politicians as distrustful and suspicious of each other.

In the political sphere, Entelis shows clear pro-U.S. bias in his treatment of the Western Sahara. A map on the cover shows the disputed territory as a part of Morocco without so much as a dotted line separating it. This is a difficult position to uphold when, at the time of printing, the Western Sahara people were not only in rebellion but had carried the fight to Moroccan soil. He makes only scant references to the "so-called"

Polarisio Front, describing it as a creature of Algeria (p. 124). This is in line with current Moroccan and U.S. policy. He also fails to mention the importance of the Western Sahara's huge phosphate deposits. Morocco's own phosphate exports are a major source of foreign exchange and, as a recent article in Africa News points out, an independent Saharan Republic could undercut Morocco's phosphate exports, causing a price drop which could "cripple Morocco's development plans."²

If he seems sympathetic to the revolutionary aspirations of North African peoples, and critical of repressive French colonial policies, he stops half-way, and fails to take the French to task for their true goals and motives. Furthermore, his revolutionary sympathies end altogether when it comes to the attempts of Berber and Saharan peoples to free themselves from northern domination. Entelis shows himself to be anti-colonial, but not anti-imperialist.

This work is informative in content and organized in style; the analyses are well developed, and observations are often astute. It is noted, for example, how Algeria's nonaligned stance has made it an ideal mediator between such hostile rivals as Libya and Egypt (summer 1977). Algeria, of course, still enjoys the status of a trusted go-between in international incidents. The book could be a useful addition to an upper division political science or history course, or an effective introduction to a non-specialist. It needs, however, to be supplemented by material from a socio-economic orientation, as well as by material reflecting different political viewpoints.

*Steve Harmon
Dept. of History
University of California
Los Angeles*

Notes

1. Charles C. Stewart, The Economic History of Morocco, 1912-1956. 1962.
2. Africa News, Feb. 16, 1981, Vol. XVI, No. 7:6.